



Rusalki as Bridge, Counter-Archive, and Ethical Method in Holocaust Theatre Education

by Danielle Wirsansky

Introduction

There is a moment that repeats itself whenever I use theatre to teach the Holocaust—whether in a classroom, a community setting, or a post-show conversation. Someone arrives prepared to talk about facts: dates, perpetrators, policies, and the scale of violence. Someone else arrives bracing against feeling: I can’t handle this, I don’t want graphic details, I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing. Between these positions sits a central pedagogical problem (Lindquist 2007, 24). Holocaust education does not fail because we lack information; it falters because approach is difficult. How do we bring learners close enough to historical violence to understand its stakes, without turning suffering into spectacle or allowing emotional overwhelm to become avoidance (Singer 2020, 4)?

In *The Secrets We Keep*, I approached that problem through folklore—specifically through the rusalki, water-associated legendary beings from Slavic traditions often linked to women who died violently, prematurely, or unjustly and who return, unresolved, to haunt the moral world of the living (Dynda 2017, 83-4). The musical’s premise is simple in outline and ethically complex in motion: “In the mystical realm of the rusalki, a Jewish Polish woman, tragically taken during the Holocaust and turned into a rusalka, discovers an unexpected chance for revenge when she befriends a young woman who unknowingly carries the bloodline of her murderer” (Wirsansky 2024). In other words, the story begins after death, in a realm that refuses closure. Its central question—what justice can mean when the world has already permitted atrocity—does not invite the audience to look away from history. It asks them to stay with history’s pressure in another register: one where the dead speak, where moral injury persists, and where vengeance and forgiveness are not tidy opposites.

I write from the position of both educator and playwright. I wrote *The Secrets We Keep* as part of my broader work using theatre as a mode of Holocaust education, and my analysis here emerges from that dual perspective. I imagine this approach as most appropriate for upper-level high school students, college students, and adult/community audiences, particularly in settings where learners have already received basic historical grounding in the Holocaust. It works best when learners have enough context to understand that the folklore frame is a mode of interpretation, not a replacement for historical evidence.

About the photos throughout the article: Scenes from *The Secrets We Keep*, performed in April 2024 at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Produced by White Mouse Productions. Photos by Danielle Wirsansky.

That register creates possibilities, but it also demands boundaries. Because violence against women can be reproduced as spectacle even in work that aims to condemn it, the musical's ethical method depends on staging knowledge without staging violation (Solga 2009, 1-2).

I chose rusalki in part because they are a Slavic legend rooted in the very region of Europe where the Holocaust's most concentrated violence unfolded—against Jews, and, in gendered ways, against women (Dynda 2017, 88; Kühne 2010, 133; Lower 2005, 9). That geographic and cultural specificity matters: The legendary being is not decorative but situated.

This article argues that rusalki function in Holocaust theatre education in three interlocking ways. First, they operate as a pedagogical bridge: a recognizable folklore structure that invites approach while guiding learners back toward historical specificity. Second, they operate as a counter-archive: a form capable of holding grief, rage, moral injury, and irresolution without pretending these experiences substitute for documentation. Third, they operate as an ethical method: a way to address gendered harm and the body without staging violence as spectacle, and without using “monstrosity” as an alibi that de-historicizes perpetrators.

Framework — Monsters as Meaning-Making Tools in Holocaust Education

This special issue's premise—that monsters, cryptids, and legendary beings operate as powerful communicative tools—captures something educators routinely see in practice: Learners often approach what frightens them through story before they can approach it through analysis (Cohen 1996, 3-4). Legendary beings function as cultural “meaning-making machines,” not because they simplify reality, but because they give people forms for naming what otherwise stays unspeakable: anxiety, danger, otherness, grief, moral rupture, and the boundaries of the human (Halberstam 1995, 69; Cohen 1996, 4). In classrooms and community learning spaces alike, monsters can create an entry point into complex subjects by organizing attention and emotion—helping learners move from avoidance into articulation, and from articulation into inquiry (Cohen 1996, 4). Monster frameworks can fail here if they become a smoothing device—turning historical catastrophe into a generalized morality tale that offers catharsis without accountability.

A crucial distinction in this terrain is between monsters as creatures and monsterization as a social process (Beyer et al. 2019, 12). In this article, I treat monstrosity less as a label—something that certain figures “are”—and more as a communicative practice that marks bodies and groups as outside the human community (Bandura 1999, 194). This matters profoundly in Holocaust contexts, where dehumanization was not metaphorical but institutionalized: a political and cultural technology that enabled exclusion, dispossession, humiliation, and mass murder (Bandura 1999, 194; [Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004](#), 13). A responsible “monster pedagogy” therefore cannot simply relocate evil into the inhuman. It must help learners analyze how monsterization operates—how people become framed as killable, contaminating, or less-than-human—and how those framings are made persuasive (Bandura 1999, 194).

This is where the rusalka becomes pedagogically useful in a specific, situated way. As Slavic legendary beings, their place-based rootedness matters for two reasons. First, it resists abstraction. When “the Holocaust” becomes a floating symbol of evil, learners can discuss it at a safe distance;

a regionally resonant legendary figure can help restore a sense of embeddedness—communities, languages, landscapes, and social proximity (Cohen 1996, 4). Second, it raises an ethical responsibility: Folklore is not interchangeable. Legendary beings carry histories of meaning that shift across time and space, and educators must avoid treating them as aesthetic props (Cohen 1996, 4-5). In *The Secrets We Keep*, the rusalka is therefore not a fantasy overlay but a culturally situated frame that supports historical specificity while opening space for moral questions that documentary narration alone may not fully hold.

Folklore's pedagogical power here is not that it makes atrocity "easier." It makes **approach** possible (Cohen 1996, 4). The legendary gives learners a form through which to confront the persistence of moral injury: that injustice does not end when the event is over, that grief can remain unassimilable, and that desires for vengeance and fantasies of repair can coexist with impulses toward forgiveness (Caruth 1996, 4; Shay 2014, 182).

Pedagogical Bridge — Tethering Folklore to Historical Specificity

The musical's most direct bridge between folklore and historical specificity occurs in a scene informed by Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors*, in which violence against Jewish people by Polish neighbors is described through a barn burning that Luba, the musical's Jewish Polish protagonist who becomes a rusalka after her murder, is powerless to stop (Gross 2001, 7; Persak 2011, 410-11). The scene shifts the audience from mythic atmosphere into a historically situated problem: violence enacted not only by occupying forces but also through local participation, proximity, and community self-exoneration (Gross 2001, 86; Persak 2011, 410-12). The rusalka frame makes the scene approachable, but the scene itself refuses abstraction. What the audience confronts is not generalized evil, but human violence enacted within communities.

The Counter-Archive — What Performance Holds That Evidence Alone Cannot

If the bridge function of *The Secrets We Keep* tethers the legendary realm to historically situated violence, the show's counter-archive work explains why the legendary frame is not merely decorative. By **counter-archive**, I do not mean an alternative set of facts, nor a license to invent history. I mean a form that can hold what often exceeds the capacities of conventional historical narration in educational settings: the persistence of grief, the instability of moral categories under extreme violence, the felt consequences of inherited harm, and the problem of irresolution (Taylor 2003, 19-21; Shay 2012, 59-60). Holocaust pedagogy rightly foregrounds evidence—testimony, documents, scholarship, historical context—because denial and distortion remain active threats (IHRA 2019, 10; IHRA 2019, 39-40). Yet evidence alone does not answer what learners should do with what they now know; the counter-archive names the space where knowledge becomes ethically and affectively consequential (Taylor 2003, 20-1; Shay 2012, 59-60).

Performance is particularly suited to counter-archival work because it produces meaning through bodies in shared time (Taylor 2003, 20-1, 44). Theatre does not simply tell an audience what happened; it stages relationship—between characters, between past and present, between speaker and witness (Taylor 2003, 20-1). That relationality is educational: It asks audiences to hold contradiction, remain present through discomfort, and negotiate historical knowledge in public (Taylor 2003, 2, 20-1).

The end of Act I offers a second example. The rusalki prepare for Trinity Week, the one week of the year when, according to some Slavic traditions, these water-associated female spirits are allowed to leave the rivers, lakes, or other bodies of water to which they are bound (Dynda 2017, 96-7). In many traditions, rusalki are understood as the restless spirits of women or girls who died violently, prematurely, or unjustly, often by drowning; their attachment to water therefore marks both the site of death and the condition of their unresolved return (Dynda 2017, 83-4). What begins as ritual and permission changes as Luba articulates her pain: The other rusalki are overwhelmed by her grief and gather into a collective (Wirsansky 2024). Trinity Week becomes an embodied metaphor for the limits of permission—one week of exit, a lifetime of return—and gives the audience a structure for feeling the constraints that history imposes even after the event is “over.”

Seen this way, the rusalka is not simply a monster figure but a counter-archival device: the returned dead whose continued presence insists that the past remains morally unfinished (LaCapra 2001, 89-90). This insistence is especially useful in Holocaust education because students often seek closure—an ending that restores balance, assigns clear moral roles, and allows the subject to be concluded (LaCapra 2001, 90). The counter-archive refuses that demand. It makes room for the fact that atrocity creates lives that cannot be “repaired” into wholeness and histories that cannot be neatly resolved into lessons that reassure (LaCapra 2001, 90). In the show’s world, the dead return not because of supernatural spectacle, but because injustice is not over simply because time has passed (LaCapra 2001, 89).

At the same time, counter-archival work must remain accountable to historical specificity ([United States Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.](#), 1-2). A common concern about allegorical or folkloric approaches to atrocity is that symbolic forms may detach audiences from evidence. Yet the problem is not symbolism itself. Folklore, metaphor, and narrative can communicate forms of communal, affective, and moral knowledge that official records may not be designed to hold. Alessandro Portelli’s work on oral history is useful here: He argues that the importance of oral testimony may lie not only in its adherence to fact but also in its departures from fact, where “imagination, symbolism, and desire” emerge; in this sense, even “wrong” statements may remain psychologically or meaningfully true (Portelli 1998, 67). The rusalka does not replace the historical record; she gives form to the unresolved meanings that remain after the record has established what occurred.

Ethical Method — Gender, the Body, and Refusing Spectacle

If the counter-archive names what performance can hold, an ethical method determines *how* it holds it. This is where “teaching with monsters” becomes most vulnerable (Cohen 1996, 4-5; Singer 2020, 4). Legendary beings can make difficult histories approachable, but approachability can slide into distortion; ambiguity can slide into relativism; and emotional intensity can slide into voyeurism (Singer 2020, 4). The question is not whether such content should be addressed—silence is its own distortion—but what it means to address it without reproducing harm as spectacle (Singer 2020, 4). For that reason, *The Secrets We Keep* relies on an ethical method built around three practical guardrails (Singer 2020, 4).

Guardrail 1: No spectacle of harm

The first principle is a refusal of the assumption that seriousness requires display (Solga 2009, 1-2). In Holocaust-related work, there is often pressure—explicit or implicit—to “show what really happened” to prove fidelity (Singer 2020, 4). Yet staging violence can produce a contradictory result: Instead of sharpening ethical attention, it can train audiences to consume suffering as dramatic content (Solga 2009, 2). The female body is particularly vulnerable to this logic, because theatrical traditions have long treated violence against women as a catalyst for plot or a shorthand for “darkness” (Solga 2009, 1-2).

In *The Secrets We Keep*, this principle shaped two key staging choices. The violence inflicted on Luba—the harm that leads to her death and transformation—is never shown directly but suggested through shadow and implication (Wirsansky 2024). Likewise, the show opens with a man harassing Luba and the rusalki dragging him away to kill him, yet the death is also suggested rather than depicted (Wirsansky 2024). These choices allow the audience to understand violence and consequence without being asked to consume bodily harm as proof of seriousness.

This principle can translate directly to pedagogy. In classroom or community settings, “no spectacle” means educators do not rely on graphic materials to compel seriousness (Singer 2020, 4). It means choosing sources and images deliberately, preparing learners for what they will encounter, and prioritizing contextualization and reflection over shock (Singer 2020, 4; [Echoes & Reflections 2023](#), 1).

Guardrail 2: No monster-as-alibi

The second guardrail rejects the pedagogical comfort of calling perpetrators “monsters.” In genocide education, this move can feel morally clarifying, but it can also function as an alibi: If perpetrators were inhuman, the violence becomes safely exceptional, and the analysis of institutions, social dynamics, and neighbor participation recedes (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 8). *The Secrets We Keep* instead uses monstrosity to reveal a process—how violence remakes those it touches, how revenge can reproduce the logic it condemns, and how communities can participate in harm while maintaining self-narratives of innocence (Gross 2001, 7–8).

Luba’s central moral conflict is structured not around defeating a supernatural villain but around what it would mean for her to become the agent of violence against an innocent descendant (Wirsansky 2024). The finale crystallizes this refusal: Luba realizes that killing the descendant would not restore justice; it would make her monstrous “like the people who turned her into a monster,” and she rejects that transformation (Wirsansky 2024). The ending denies catharsis without denying rage: harm is shown as something humans choose, inherit, and risk reproducing unless they actively resist it (Bandura 1999, 194; Nussbaum 2016, 5).

For educators, “no monster-as-alibi” means framing legendary beings as tools for analyzing social processes rather than metaphors that evacuate history (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13). It means asking learners not “Who is the monster?” but “How does monsterization work?” and “What comforts are we reaching for when we label someone inhuman?” (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13; Bandura 1999, 194).

Guardrail 3: Choice and care in learning

The third guardrail is methodological care: designing learning environments that allow agency, minimize coercion, and recognize that difficult material can reactivate personal histories (Echoes & Reflections 2023, 1). This is not an argument for avoiding hard subjects but for building structures that make hard subjects teachable: clear framing, content advisories, guided reflection, and norms that keep discussion from drifting into voyeuristic curiosity or moral grandstanding (Echoes & Reflections 2023, 1; Lindquist 2007, 24; Singer 2020, 4). The show counters that risk by treating the rusalka not as a seductive horror trope but as a moral and communal figure: the returned dead whose presence exposes the unfinishedness of injustice and the cost of perpetuating violence (LaCapra 2001, 89–90; Wirsansky 2024).

Portable Practices—

What Educators Can Adapt

Although *The Secrets We Keep* emerges from a specific artistic process, the pedagogical value of legendary beings lies in their portability (Cohen 1996, 4–5). Educators and community practitioners do not need to reproduce the musical to learn from it. What transfers is the method: how a legendary figure can help learners approach difficult history while remaining accountable to evidence and ethical boundaries (Singer 2020, 4).

First, begin by treating the legendary being as a frame for inquiry, not an answer (Cohen 1996, 4). For a rusalka, the demand might be: What does it mean for the dead to return? What obligations remain when harm is irreversible? What kind of justice is imaginable after mass violence? This shift keeps folklore from becoming purely decorative and helps prevent students from treating the “monster” as a metaphor that ends discussion rather than opening it (Humpherys and Babb 2020, 34).

Teacher Toolbox

Discussion Prompts

(Adaptable across settings)

- What does the returned dead demand from the living—memory, justice, acknowledgment, responsibility?
- Where does the story insist on historical specificity, and where does it refuse “closure”? Why?
- What is the difference between vengeance and justice here, and what does each one cost?
- When does “monstrous” function as an analytic category (a process), and when does it function as an alibi?
- What does the work refuse to show—and what ethical claim is that refusal making?
- How do community dynamics (*Neighbors*, social proximity, participation) change how we understand violence?
- What do we do with histories that cannot be repaired? What forms help us hold that?



Second, build an explicit handoff from folklore to historical specificity. In practice, this means pairing the legendary frame with at least one piece of historical evidence—testimony, a document excerpt, a scholarly account—and then asking students to describe what each form can and cannot do (Singer 2020, 1; IHRA 2019, 10). What can the archive establish? What can it not transmit as felt experience? What can folklore hold without substituting for documentation?

Third, normalize the idea that atrocity learning produces irresolution (Britzman 2000, 77). Here, counter-archival forms can help. A short reflection practice—journaling, a structured discussion circle, a brief creative response anchored to a specific historical detail—can make room for grief, anger, and moral discomfort without drifting into vagueness (IHRA 2019, 9, 10). The key is the anchor: Learners should be asked to attach their response to something historically specific (a place, a date, a documented pattern of violence, a defined social dynamic such as neighbor participation), so that affect remains accountable to history (IHRA 2019, 10).

Fourth, when legendary beings engage gendered violence and the body, use boundaries as part of the pedagogy rather than an afterthought. Educators can adopt the same approach by establishing a “no spectacle” norm: Avoid relying on graphic materials to prove seriousness, prepare learners for difficult content, and guide discussion away from violent detail toward systems, choices, and consequences (Singer 2020, 4; Echoes & Reflections 2023, 1).

Finally, incorporate “monsterization” as an analytic lens rather than a moral label (Bandura 1999, 194; Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13). In Holocaust contexts, learners may reflexively call perpetrators “monsters” (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13). Rather than treating that impulse as wrong, educators can treat it as a teaching moment: What work does that label do for us? What does it obscure? How did monsterization operate historically as a process of dehumanization, and how does it operate socially today? This move keeps the legendary being from functioning as an alibi and uses monstrosity to deepen, rather than flatten, historical understanding (Bandura 1999, 194).

Conclusion

Teaching with monsters is not inherently liberatory, and it is not inherently dangerous. Its value depends on method (Cohen 1996, 4-5). In Holocaust education, legendary beings can either become a way of floating above history—turning atrocity into mood—or they can become a scaffold that allows learners to approach what they otherwise cannot hold, while remaining anchored to evidence and specificity (Lindquist 2007, 23-4; Singer 2020, 4). *The Secrets We Keep* offers one model of the latter (Wirsansky 2024). The rusalka operates as a pedagogical bridge that invites approach while returning learners to historically situated questions of community violence and complicity; as a counter-archive that holds grief, moral injury, and irresolution without claiming to replace documentation; and as an ethical method that refuses spectacle—especially in the representation of gendered harm—while insisting that violence’s consequences remain legible (Cohen 1996, 4-5; Singer 2020, 4; Wirsansky 2024).

In the space between whimsy and shadow, the legendary can create a language for what learners struggle to name: the persistence of injustice, the temptation to reproduce violence, and the

difficult work of refusing that reproduction (Cohen 1996, 4-5). When educators and artists treat monsters not as metaphors that end analysis but as forms that open inquiry—forms disciplined by evidence and ethics—legendary beings can deepen communication about history in classrooms and in community settings (IHRA 2019, 10; Singer 2020, 5).

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